DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 644 RC 017 437

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TITLE Using Strategic Planning To Improve Rural Schools.
INSTITUTION Learning Inst., Springhouse, PA.; Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 40p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Educational Assessment; Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Planning; *Educational Policy; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Mission Statements; *Policy Formation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools
IDENTIFIERS Delaware; Pennsylvania; Research for Better Schools Incorporated; Rural Assistance Councils; *Strategic Planning

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the elements of strategic planning and applies them to educational reform and improvement. The paper also describes how a planning model, Strategic Planning for Educational Reform and Improvement (SPERI), was used by Rural Assistance Councils (RACs) in Pennsylvania and Delaware, with technical assistance from Research for Better Schools (RBS), the Regional Educational Laboratory for the mid-Atlantic region . Important SPERI elements include: (1) preliminary planning; (2) focused issues assessment; (3) targeted research; and tailored policy analysis. Preliminary research involves the establishment of a committed and informed planning team and a contract detailing the planning effort. The focused issues assessment is the process of creating a finite list of issues to be addressed. The process begins with the articulation of a mission statement and ends with a research agenda for examining the issues. Targeted research is the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data to confirm or revise the team's understanding of the issues, with a goal of developing a set of alternative scenarios and contingencies. The objective of the tailored policy analysis is to analyze current policy and adjust it to meet new objectives. Tailored policy analysis requires scrutiny of the research and alternative scenarios, resulting in policy recommendations for implementation. RBS began working with the SPERI model by setting up RACs in Delaware and Pennsylvania. The RACs used SPERI to identify and confront rural education issues relating to economics, staff, programs, administration, and families and communities. The paper emphasizes that SPERI is important, not as a product, but as a process controlled by those using it. The Appendices present the rural education issues instrument and results. The paper contains 31 references. (TES)

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USING STRATEGIC PLANNING TO IMPROVE RURAL SCHOOLS

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The author conducted work upon which this manuscript is based while Senior Research Associate at Research for Better Schools, Inc. The work was funded in part by the Office of Education. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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USING STRATEGIC PLANNING TO IMPROVE RURAL SCHOOLS*

Strategic planning has had a long history. Its origins are military and it has been used by generals to help them formulate battles for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years (Quinn, 1980). Around the turn of the twentieth century, its value for international policy was recognized and strategic planning became a commonly used geopolitical decisionmaking tool (Mahan, 1890, Makinder, 1919). It was adopted as a corporate planning process in the mid-twentieth century and introduced to the public, not-for-profit sector shortly thereafter (VonNeuman & Morgenstern, 1947, Wilkinson, 1986). Educators began using strategic planning in the early 1970's (Cope, 1981; Schendel and Hatten, 1972). Today, strategic planning is the dominant management planning paradigm in North America (Hurst, 1986).

But what is strategic planning? One of America's leading experts on strategic planning, George Steiner (1979), says there is no clear consensus among those writing about the topic. However, he and others have described several themes underlying strategic planning. These themes represent the key principles and beliefs upon which this planning process is based:

- We can influence the future. Strategic planners believe that what is done today can help shape what happens tomorrow, next year, and even next decade.

- Today's trends can help us anticipate the future. Strategic planners believe that many current events presage future events. By "reading" the trends shown in these current events and extrapolating from them, we can describe a limited number of probable alternative future scenarios -- outline descriptions of what will happen in years to come.

- Today's decisions can help us realize the future scenario that is best for us. Strategic planners believe that with a series of systematically-arrived at decisions and plans, we can exploit opportunities, avoid pitfalls, and bring about a desired future.

*The author wishes to thank Russell Dusewicz for his help in the preparation of this manuscript.

Authors writing in the field have named a number of elements and activities that characterize the strategic planning process. One such element is a preliminary planning phase often called "planning to plan." In this phase the strategic planning process is being set up. Top management is coming to an understanding of the process and deciding who will be involved. They are creating work plans, setting timelines, and allocating financial and human resources to the task. They are defining roles and assigning responsibilities to planners.

Another important element of the strategic planning process is research. The research phase usually begins with the development of hypotheses about current status and future possibilities. In its initial stages this research phase depends largely on the experiences, hunches, and "gut feelings" of the top managers and planners. Although not technically based on "hard" data the hypotheses that come from this early stage of research are solid enough to be used to guide more systematic data collection and analysis. As strategic planners move to these more systematic data collection activities they use both qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather information about the world around them, their organization, even their own values and biases. These activities often are called environmental scanning, organizational auditing, and values auditing. The data gained from these activities are used to test hypotheses generated earlier.

Mission statement is also an important strategic planning element. The mission statement is a rationale which describes the organization's purpose and objectives. Most authors writing about strategic planning define the mission statement as the answer to the question, "What are we about?" They go on to say that usually it includes what the organization does, how it

does it, and why it does it. Once written, the mission statement becomes a cornerstone for the remaining strategic planning elements and activities.

Forecasting, another important strategic planning activity, is the development of several alternative predictions about the future. The predictions, also called future scenarios, are extrapolations and educated guesses that strategic planners base on the research information they have collected and analyzed. The predictions can be broad -- describing world-wide events -- or they can be narrow -- dealing with local conditions or markets. In all cases, however, they include reference to likely effects on the organization. As part of the forecasting activities strategic planners also usually calculate the probability of each alternative future coming true. This is done either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Potential organizational reactions are at the heart of still another strategic planning element, contingency planning. Using their alternative future scenarios, strategic planners "play out" different ways their organization could respond to each alternative. They evaluate the consequences of each response and plot a series of tactical options for their organization. They then develop hypothetical policies that lead to smooth, successful implementation of each option. The goal here is to create a portfolio of policies that minimize negative consequences to the organization and maximize positive ones.

The strategic plan is the last element and the product of the strategic planning process. It is a description of the organization's mission and its most advantageous future scenario along with the policies and tactics needed to realize that future within the context of the mission. Although fairly comprehensive, the strategic plan is not necessarily detailed. It does not, for example, need to include specific operational considerations such as

program personnel, budgets, or milestones. These considerations often are left to program managers as they develop action plans for their units. Neither is the strategic plan immutable. It is subject to revisions when necessary. Many experts in the field recommend ongoing, periodic review and revision.

And this recommendation leads to a final key principle of strategic planning: it is more important as a process than as a product. The value, for its advocates, is in its philosophy more than anything else. As George Steiner puts it, ". . . strategic planning is an attitude, a way of life. (It) necessitates dedication to acting on the basis of contemplation of the future, a determination to plan constantly and systematically as an integral part of management. Strategic planning is more of a thought process, an intellectual exercise, than a prescribed set of processes, procedures, structures, or techniques."

Educational Strategic Planning

Among those writing in the field of strategic planning, there exists great consensus that the strategic planning procedures developed for the private sector cannot be translated directly into the public sector. There are just too many structural differences between the two sectors. For one thing, private sector strategic planning is top-down: initiated and monitored by the chief executive officer, an individual answerable to virtually no one save the stockholders (Halachmi, 1986; Steiner, 1979). In the public sector, particularly in education, no such individual exists. School district superintendents have some of the same responsibilities as corporate CEOs but they do not have the same kind of authority.

Also corporate strategic planning is profit-driven. That is, its whole reason for existence is enhancement of the financial bottom line (Halachmi, 1986' Horner, 1979). Bottom line historically has not been a viable concept in the public sector (except recently, with the establishment of for-profit health care and child care facilities). The concept is particularly foreign in education where even productivity and measures of excellence are ill-defined notions.

In addition, politics is a much more influential factor in planning in the public sector than it is in the private (Cope, 1981; Horner, 1979). And partly because of this political ingredient, the atmosphere for public sector planning tends to be more reactive than its private sector counterpart (Halachmi, 1986; Walter, 1983).

Therefore, reason the experts, any strategic planning model used in the public sector is (and should be) a modification of the corporate strategic planning model (Cope, 1981; Halachmi, 1986; Horner, 1979; Steiner, 1979; Walter, 1983; Wilkinson, 1986). Furthermore, they argue, educational strategic planning models are (and should be) even more unique because the constraints operating on education policymaking and decisionmaking are unique. For instance:

- politics may dominate policy
- decisionmaking is incremental
- latitude in policy is narrow
- policy consistency is broader and more involved
- lines of authority are not clearly defined
- participative decisionmaking is the norm (Cope, 1981).

Moreover, there are many more "givens," contextual constraints, operating in the educational milieu. Staff, budget caps, and laws are three obvious

examples. Building or land restrictions, and client characteristics, are two less obvious ones.

Because of the contextual constrains and parameters on policy in education, the challenge for educational strategic planners is to understand the internal and external boundaries and to use this understanding to design policies that will position the resources under their control -- programs, budget lines, staff, goals, and so forth -- to maximize educational excellence. All this suggests that a strategic planning model that stresses understanding of forces and positioning of resources is the most useful one for education.

Strategic Planning for Educational Reform and Improvement

Strategic Planning for Educational Reform and Improvement (SPERI) is such a model. Its philosophical roots lie in this notion of educational excellence through understanding and positioning; but it is much more than an intellectual exercise. SPERI is a policy formulation system that applies the elements of strategic planning to schools and school systems. It is more than simply a thought process, it is a tool to assist top educational administrators anticipate changes in their environments and plan appropriate, responsive policy alternatives for dealing with them (D'Amico, 1988b).

In contrast to many corporate strategic planning systems, SPERI is a set of manageable, concise procedures specifically designed to help educators formulate effective, future-oriented policies. These procedures are clustered in four SPERI components: Planning to Plan, Focused Issues Assessment, Targeted Research and Tailored Policy Analysis. Each component helps planners meet a set of objectives and each results in a different set of outcomes. Used in combination, the SPERI components help educational

planners arrive at effective strategic plans for schools or districts by leading them through a rational, policy-oriented planning system.

Planning to Plan

Planning to Plan is the first SPERI component and it is the "bottom-up" part of strategic planning (Ecker, 1986). The objectives of Planning to Plan are to develop a team of committed planners who understand the strategic planning process and to arrive at a negotiated contract with them. This contract specifies planning team roles and responsibilities as well as the prerequisites and support systems necessary to accomplish the SPERI effort (Steiner, 1979; Webster, 1985).

The development of this contract is a vital first step in conducting SPERI. It insures that all participants in the strategic planning effort will have a mutual understanding of what is to take place, who is to do it, and what they can expect in the way of human, material, and financial assistance (Oberhammer, 1986). Moreover, the outcome of Planning to Plan -- the SPERI contract among top management and the members of the planning team -- can be used as a kind of action plan for the remainder of the SPERI effort.

Planning to Plan is initiated by top management. They specifically define the intended strategic planning activities, outline the scope of the strategic planning effort, set its schedule and budget, and create a strategic planning team. They also establish an understanding of and commitment to their strategic planning effort among the key planners on the strategic planning team. The outcomes of Planning to Plan are:

- a motivated, committed strategic planning team that understands the goals of strategic planning, in general, and the objectives of their strategic planning effort, in particular; and
- a SPERI contract among top management and the strategic planning team members detailing the strategic planning effort.

These outcomes represent a GO/NO GO decision point in SPERI. If a strategic planning team cannot be assembled nor a suitable SPERI contract negotiated, the process should not continue. It will not succeed (Steiner, 1979). These outcomes also set the stage for the next component, Focused Issues Assessment.

Focused Issues Assessment

Focused Issues Assessment is the second component of SPERI. In this component, the planning team arrives at a finite list of clearly specified issues to be addressed during the course of strategic planning effort. There are two objectives for Focused Issues Assessment: to analyze the current situation and create the list itself and to develop comfortable working relationships among planning team members.

The importance of the first objective is well documented among strategic planning experts. Lilly (1984), for instance, states that the success of any subsequent strategic planning is questionable without the information that comes from the creation of such a list of specific issues -- and from the situation analysis that goes with its creation. Steiner (1979) refers to it as being essential. He and Cope (1981) both point out that it is perhaps the only formal opportunity that the planning team has to influence top management by providing information necessary for establishing priorities and objectives.

The second objective of Focused Issues Assessment, the establishment of a productive working relationship, is of almost equal importance (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Steiner, 1979). Establishing such a relationship benefits the strategic planning effort itself, by laying a groundwork of candor, communication, delegation, and cooperation upon which subsequent planning activities are built. There is payoff beyond this, however. For once set

up, these relationships tend to continue and facilitate internal coordination of the operational activities that come from the strategic planning effort (Cleveland, 1981; Steiner, 1979).

Focused Issues Assessment begins with the articulation of a mission statement, an agreed-upon, general vision of the way things should be (Halachmi, 1986; Raze, 1986; Steiner, 1979). Using this statement as a touchstone, the planning team analyzes the situation, contrasting "what is" with "what should be" and hypothesizing reasons for any discrepancies (Amara, 1980). In the course of this analysis, opportunities, threats, and challenges are shaken out and put into priority order (Camillus, 1986). Finally, they are re-defined as a research agenda for the Targeted Research Study. Thus the outcomes of the Focused Issues Assessment component of SPERI are:

- an articulated mission statement, agreed-upon by the planning team and top management;
- a list of clearly defined issues -- in priority order -- to be addressed by strategic planners; and
- a research agenda for examining the issues and gauging their magnitude, importance, and urgency.

Targeted Research

Targeted Research, the most scientific SPERI component, is an implementation of the research agenda. The stress is on getting a better understanding of the current and future impact of the issues identified in Focused Issues Assessment. Although the notion of conducting research to clarify impact permeates nearly all fields of inquiry, the rationales and procedures of this SPERI component are derived from marketing, management,

and general systems theories (Camillus, 1986; Cope, 1981) as well as from educational planning (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986).

Armed with their list of issue priorities, the members of the strategic planning team -- or their delegates -- examine their own organization and the environment in which it exists. They collect qualitative and quantitative data to clarify the true effect of each issue and to extrapolate several different predictions of what the future might bring. The data gathering and analysis techniques they use come from many diverse fields such as economics, political science, risk management, sociology, and anthropology (O'Conner, 1978; Pearce & Robinson, 1982; Selltiz, Wrightsman & Cook, 1976; Steiner, 1979; Wilkinson, 1986).

The first objective of Target Research is to gain, with some precision, an additional understanding of the impact, urgency, and importance of each issue identified during Focused Issues Assessment. The second is to use this understanding to re-evaluate the issues and their priority and to project various ways to respond to each one. There are two outcomes of Targeted Research:

- a possibly revised, re-prioritized list of issues to be addressed by strategic planners along with data-based summaries detailing the magnitude, urgency, and importance of each;
- a set of alternative future scenarios (outlines of different responses to each issue) and associated tactical contingencies (operational plans for responding).

At this point the planning team is ready to turn the strategic planning effort back to top management for the next component, Tailored Policy Analysis. This final SPERI component involves using the future scenarios for policy assessment and revision.

Tailored Policy Analysis

The final SPERI component is Tailored Policy Analysis and it is the culmination of strategic planning. Top management, often in cooperation with members of the planning team, sort through the research information, the future scenarios, and the tactical contingencies to create a portfolio of policy options. The objective of Tailored Policy Analysis is to analyze current policy and adjust it, where necessary, to meet new objectives that have been derived from desirable future scenarios (Hurst, 1986; Lilly, 1984; Steiner, 1979). In the course of this analysis, adjustments also may be made in the mission statement: aligning it more closely to the demands of the future scenarios, for example.

The initial step of Tailored Policy Analysis requires that top management scrutinize the alternative futures submitted by the planning team after their Targeted Research. These managers then select a limited number and ascertain how current policy configurations contribute to or prevent realization of these preferred future scenarios. In doing this, they also re-examine and re-evaluate organizational resource capabilities and structures and the organizational mission itself. The major questions for consideration during Tailored Policy Analysis are: Where do we want to be? What's helping us or holding us back? What should be changed?

The outcomes of the Tailored Policy Analysis are a set of policy recommendations which include suggestions for operational planning and implementation. The recommendations are keyed to present decisions but grounded in future impact.

The submission of these policy recommendations signals the completion of Strategic Planning for Educational Reform and Improvement. The next step is adoption of the recommendations (or not) and implementation of a set of

concomitant policy changes. In most educational settings, this moves the process from a strictly management activity to one that is political.

SPERI in Action

The SPERI system is a change process and its developers like to think of it as a rational change process. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, however; and the proof of SPERI as a planning system is in its use for planning. The opportunity to test the system's usefulness as a planning tool came soon after its development and it proved to work well in urban and suburban settings (D'Amico, 1988a). Thus encouraged by their successes in these settings, RBS developers decided to utilize the SPERI system wherever feasible as a way to facilitate rational planning and decisionmaking.

This past year they were able to broaden the system's application by incorporating into their initiative in rural education. What follows is a description of the use of SPERI as a state level planning tool for rural school improvement in two states, Delaware and Pennsylvania. It begins with a brief overview of RBS' rural initiative and the policy formulation bodies RBS has established to facilitate activities associated with that initiative, the Rural Assistance Councils (RACs). Finally it offers case studies (Yin, 1984) chronicaling how the members of the Delaware and Pennsylvania RACs are using SPERI to identify challenges to the effectiveness of their rural schools and to set agendas for the improvement of those schools.

RBS' Rural Initiative and the Rural Assistance Councils

RBS' Rural Education Initiative began in 1987 when laboratory staff created a joint venture project with three small schools to install and evaluate a comprehensive program of computer-managed instruction (CMI). The initiative is now in its third year and the CMI project has been augmented

by other projects aimed at improving education for students in small, rural schools in the mid-Atlantic region including:

- one to identify and describe promising educational practices especially well-suited to rural schools;
- one to establish a regional rural and small schools information exchange network; and
- one to help state level planners identify the most pressing needs of their rural schools and develop state level plans to address those needs.

One of the first steps taken by RBS to support these rural education projects was the establishment of four Rural Assistance Councils, one each for the states of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. These Councils are comprised of individuals from these states who have a particular interest and expertise in educational issues that are unique to rural schools and school districts in their state.

The primary mission of each Rural Assistance Council is to develop a rural education assistance plan for its state. The Councils are independent; that is, they do not represent the interests of only the state department of education, a particular school district or any single institution in the state. Rather they represent the interests and concerns of everyone in their state who has a stake in the improvement of rural education. In addition, each RAC has its own operating procedures and its own way of accomplishing its objectives. All four RACs have set the following three objectives high on their list of priorities:

- to identify the most pressing needs of the state's rural schools and school districts;
- to develop -- in cooperation with appropriate state organizations -- state level assistance plans for attending to these needs;
- to outline an operational agenda -- one that includes suggested resources and responsibilities -- for carrying out the state level assistance plans.

This past year the Delaware and Pennsylvania Rural Assistance Councils undertook activities aimed at meeting these objectives. Their primary foci were the identification of rural needs and the development of assistance plans; their primary tool was the SPERI system.

Rural Pennsylvania and Rural Delaware

Pennsylvania is one of the country's largest states and Delaware is its smallest. Both, however, consider themselves to be rural states and the statistics bear this out to some degree (Johnson, 1989). Two of Delaware's three counties are considered rural as are nine of its sixteen school districts. Fifty-two of its 144 schools (36.11%) are in these rural districts. Over 32 percent of Delaware's 90,000 students go to rural schools making the state the seventh most rural in America -- educationally speaking. There are 23 rural counties in Pennsylvania and 80 rural school districts. Six hundred eighty-five of the state's 3,158 schools (20.67%) are in these districts and nearly 30,000 Pennsylvania students (31.07%) attend these schools.

The Rural Assistance Council members from both of these states were acutely aware of their states' rural status. Furthermore, having worked extensively with rural schools over the years, both states' RAC members also were acutely aware of the problems facing each state's rural educators, for example:

- poor economic environments
- difficulty attracting and retaining quality staff
- thin instructional programs
- small, overworked staff
- difficulty meeting state and federal regulations

- lack of community support or respect for education.

These problems, stated in this general way, were the point of departure each RAC used for SPERI.

Planning to Plan

At their first meeting, members of both the Pennsylvania and Delaware Rural Assistance Councils spent a considerable amount of time setting their operational procedures and deciding how to approach the task of identifying rural needs. In the course of these discussions, the RACs were introduced to the concepts underlying SPERI and given the option of using the process to arrive at the critical issues facing their rural schools. Although reluctant to commit to the entire process, they agreed to engage in the Focused Issues Assessment and Targeted Research phases as a way to lend structure to their discussions and investigations.

Pennsylvania

The following SPERI contract was specified for the Pennsylvania RAC:

- Scope - SPERI would be used, first, as a way to identify issues and to ascertain their importance to the state's rural educators. If the process succeeded for these tasks, then RAC members would consider it for the subsequent scenario building and policy analysis tasks. Thus the RAC would commit to completion of Focused Issues Assessment and Targeted Research only; these phases were to be completed before the end of the summer (August 1989).

- Planning Team - The planning team would consist of the members of the RAC for Focused Issues Assessment and Targeted Research. If the process went beyond these phases, team membership would be redefined.

- Responsibilities - RBS staff would coordinate SPERI, develop research designs and instruments as necessary, analyze and summarize research information, and prepare a report describing the status of rural education in Pennsylvania for the RAC. The RAC members would serve as representatives of the state's rural educators and keep these educators informed of RAC progress and activities. In addition, RAC members would assist in data collection activities and review all research summaries and reports. Lastly, they would be responsible for presenting report information to rural educators in Pennsylvania.

- Budget - The SPERI effort, as well as the RAC effort, would have no specific budget. Rather the RAC members would contribute their time and resources to both efforts as appropriate.

Delaware

In Delaware, the SPERI contract was somewhat different:

- Scope - As was the case in Pennsylvania, the Delaware RAC members agreed to use only the Focused Issues Assessment and Targeted Research phases of the process initially. Unlike their Pennsylvania counterparts, however, the members of the Delaware RAC wanted these phases to be completed by the beginning of the summer (June 1998).

- Planning Team - As with Pennsylvania, the Delaware RAC members would be the planning team initially; they would expand or alter the team's composition if and when they begin the next SPERI phases.

- Responsibilities - RBS staff would handle coordination, research and instrument design, and data analysis and summary tasks. There would be no formal report of the SPERI results developed until these results had been informally reported to rural districts and associations across the state. Such a report would be considered part of a later SPERI phase. The Delaware RAC members responsibilities were much the same as those of the Pennsylvania RAC's members with the exception that the RAC chairman would play an active role in publicizing RAC activities and progress and reporting SPERI data to the state's rural districts and associations. RBS staff would support him in this by creating press releases and briefing papers.

- Budget - There would be no budget. RAC and SPERI activities would rely on contributions of time and resources from the RAC members.

Focused Issues Assessment

In both states, the focused Issues Assessment began as a very free-wheeling discussion, covering a wide variety of topics. As the discussions began focusing, however, it became clear that in both states, there were a number of large scale issues under which many distinct problems could be grouped. The latter could be seen as symptoms of the former and the challenge for the Focused Issues Assessment was to distinguish between the two.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania RAC members began their Focused Issues deliberations with the resolution that the issues they selected should be ones of particular

impact to rural schools, not general ones that might affect these schools as well as others. This was an important decision because it narrowed the discussions and encouraged the RAC members to link what they discussed to real-world situations in rural settings. Another important decision was to build on existing information and facts in the selection of critical issues rather than rely on gut feelings or personal impressions.

With these decisions guiding them, the RAC members engaged in a structured brainstorming session (Miller, 1984) and selected seven issue areas as the most critical ones facing Pennsylvania's rural school districts. For each of these issue areas, they earmarked a number of specific problems, which represented concrete manifestations of the issues, as follows:

1. Fiscal Issues

   - General funding
   - Transportation
   - Special education
   - Building needs including maintenance and construction

2. Instructional Staff Issues

   - Recruitment in general and in particular areas of certification (foreign languages, advanced math, and science, for example)
   - Retention
   - Professional development
   - Professional isolation
   - Part-time instructional needs
   - Age and experience of teachers
   - Lack of guidance counselors (especially for elementary students)

3. Instructional Program Issues

   - Lack of advanced placement or other "special" programs
   - Home teaching and schooling
   - Low post-secondary participation rates
   - Lack of career education programs
   - Poor articulation between instructional and guidance programs
   - High drop-out rates
   - Lack of vocational education programs
   - Not enough resources for special education needs
   - Difficulty implementing technology

4. Community and Family Issues

- Economic development
- Poverty (low per capita income)
- Unemployment
- Things that put students "at-risk" (for example, alcoholism, drug abuse, poor nutrition, child abuse, divorce, single parent families, homelessness)
- Teenage suicide
- Teenage pregnancy
- High family mobility rates
- Out-migration of talented youth

5. Administrative Issues

- Few administrators responsible for performing many administrative functions
- Need for information and technical assistance in order to take advantage of opportunities
- Poor economies of scale
- Inability of obtain or develop specific expertise in order to take advantage of opportunities
- Keeping up with and meeting state and federal regulations

6. Revenue Issues

- Student matriculation in non-district schools (for example, private, parochial, out-of-state, at home)
- Tax assessments do not reflect actual usage

7. Tax Issues

- Absentee owners
- Absence of industry
- State owned land
- Income tax reciprocity with neighboring states

Delaware

The situation in Delaware was somewhat different in that the RAC members already had thought about critical issues and investigated them, on their own for their own districts or associations. They also were a tighter-knit group prior to being organized into a Rural Assistance Council than had been the case in Pennsylvania and they had been talking to each other about these issues for years. Thus they had a list of issues ready to go when they walked into the very first SPERI session. The challenge with

this RAC was to get them to define and express their issues clearly. This was done, again, by engaging them in a structured brainstorming session. During this session the RAC members developed a statement which they thought summed up all of the issues and problems facing Delaware's rural schools. It spoke to educational equity:

> The issues of rural education in Delaware are issues of fairness or equity. They reflect a situation in Delaware in which educational resources and services are inequitably distributed to schools, school districts and students according to where they live.

They also developed a list of six critical issues illustrating this inequity:

1. Equity in Funding
   - Method of raising local subsidy should be broadened by the state to include other sources besides real estate tax
   - Equalization formulas (i.e., the way funds are disbursed) should be changed
2. Inequity Brought on by Choice Legislation
   - There is legislation pending that would allow students to attend any school of their choice in the state. If passed this legislation will sanction "creaming" -- flight of the best students to the richest schools -- and undermine the quality of poorer schools.
3. Equity in Teacher Pay Scales
   - State should pay 100% of salary with no local subsidy
4. Equity in Distribution of Capital Improvement Dollars
   - Move from 60% state, 40% local toward 85% state, 15% local
5. Inequity in Access to Curriculum, Courses, and Programs
   - All students should have the opportunity to take any course
6. Inequity in Teacher Recruitment and Retention
   - Factors unrelated to salary often prevent the most highly qualified teachers from coming to rural districts; this is particularly true in the case of minority teachers.

Targeted Research

The two RACs approached the Targeted Research phase of SPERI in very different ways. This was due partly to the difference in the size of each state and how dispersed were the rural districts. It also was due partly to differences in the strength and nature of the linkages among the rural districts and associations in these states.

Pennsylvania

As noted, Pennsylvania is a very large state at over 45,000 square miles. It contains 67 counties and has over 500 school districts. Twenty-seven counties are rural as are 80 school districts. These are spread throughout the state. The combination of size and wide dispersal of rural districts work against tight linkage among rural educators; they simply do not see or talk to each other very often. They are -- like many other rural educators in America -- largely isolated from each other. They also are isolated, for the most part, from individuals in rural organizations other than those in their local communities. Because of this, the Pennsylvania RAC conducted its Targeted Research formally, using a survey.

The issues and problems identified during the Focused Issues Assessment were used as the basis for the survey which was sent to all 80 rural superintendents in the state. Respondents were asked to rate each issue and problem according to its priority in their district according to a five-point Likert scale from "very high" (5) to "very low" (1). Fifty-nine of the 80 superintendents responded for a return rate of 74%. Appendix A presents the results superimposed on the survey instrument. These include item means and response frequencies. High ratings may be interpreted as those of 4.00 and above.

In terms of the major issue areas reflected on the survey, the results were clear: fiscal issues received the highest priority rating by a wide margin. Those issue areas receiving ratings of 4.00 and above are listed in rank order below.

1. Fiscal issues (4.78)
2. Community and family issues (4.17)
3. Administrative issues (4.11)
4. Tax issues (4.00)

Looking at individual problems or issues, regardless of the issue area with which they are grouped also revealed clear results. Again economics tended to dominate. The following priority rankings are obtained for those items receiving mean ratings of 4.00 or higher. Open-ended or "other" issues or problems entered by respondents are not included due to the low frequencies and variety of these responses.

1. General funding (Fiscal issues) 4.76
2. Economic development (Community and family issues) 4.44
3. Few Administrators responsible for performing many administrative functions (Administrative issues) 4.32
4. Absence of industry (Tax issues) 4.22
5. Keeping up with and meeting state and federal regulations (Administrative issues) 4.18
6. Things that put students "at-risk" (Community and family issues) 4.16
7. Special education (Fiscal issues) 4.14
8. Transportation (Fiscal issues) 4.13
9. Poverty (Community and family issues) 4.01

Delaware

In Delaware, the RAC's Targeted Research activities were more informal. Delaware is a small state, only slightly more than 2,000 square miles, and it contains only three counties. Nine of its sixteen school districts are rural and there is a great deal of formal and informal contact among the staff of these districts. Moreover, many of Delaware's educators belong to a number of non-educational rural associations like the Farm Bureau and Grange. As a result, Delaware's rural educators are tightly networked among themselves and closely linked -- via their association memberships -- with many others in the state's rural community. Therefore, rather than use a survey to determine the issue priorities of the state's rural educators, the Delaware RAC chose to poll them in person.

Every one of Delaware's rural superintendents as well as representatives of several rural associations were invited to a one-day meeting. At this meeting, they were asked to discuss what they saw as major issues of rural education in the state and identify the ones that were the most important. Their deliberations were structured according to the Group Nominal Technique of isolating priorities (Moore, 1987). The nine individuals present at this meeting generated 63 separate concerns related to quality education for Delaware's rural students. From these 63, they distilled a priority list of "most important" issues.

- The Low Tax Base of Rural Areas was identified as the highest priority issue and the one considered to be most severely affecting the quality of rural students' education
- The potential legitimitizing of Parental Choice whereby parents would be allowed to send their children to schools outside of the rural districts was one of two issue areas given the second highest priority
- Reluctance of Teachers to locate in Rural Areas and Teach in Rural Schools also was given the second highest priority

- Referenda as a Means for Determining Tax Rates was cited as a serious obstacle to the ability to raise sufficient dollars for education in rural districts and given third place in this list of priorities

- State Regulations Requiring School Districts to Establish a Reserve in Their Local Budgets and other concerns related to the parameters placed on raising and dispersing revenue also was given third priority

- The "Hodge-Podge" of Funding Procedures that frequently prevent effective planning and service delivery on the part of rural school districts was given fourth priority

- A general Resistance to Change on the part of local taxpayers, state level policymakers, local boards of education, and even some rural district and school staff rounded out the top five issues of greatest concern to these Delaware educators

- The sixth priority issue was one involving the Current Salary Structure and Process. Both the salaries, themselves, and the benefits that go with them are considerably lower in rural districts than they are in urban or suburban one

- The attitude that Educational Expenditures Are Not Deemed Important when compared to expenditures for highways, health, and other publicly funded services was ranked as the seventh priority

- The Structure of Property Assessment and Reassessment that occurs at the county level was one of the issues identified as the eighth priority as was

- The Small Number of Administrative Staff doing a large, perhaps unmanageable, number of administrative tasks in rural districts

- Economies of Scale was the ninth priority issue and

- Poor Management and Lack of a Collegial Ethos in rural districts and Inability to Provide Students with a Sufficient Depth and Breadth in the Curriculum tied as the tenth priority.

Appendix B contains their initial 63 concerns generated by the group and a summary of the Group Nominal Technique processes.

Future Scenarios: Work in Progress

Armed with these lists of priority issues the RAC members from both Pennsylvania and Delaware began scenario development activities which are still in progress. It is interesting to note that the members of both RACs

want other rural constituencies to review the results of their Focused Issues Assessment and Targeted Research before taking the next step, creation of future scenarios.

Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, RAC members began collecting additional, statistical information and following up the survey with telephone interviews of randomly selected rural superintendents. The goal of these activities is to create a status report of rural education in the state that include the issues of concern as revealed by the survey; statistical profiles of the state's rural counties and districts; and the personal perspectives of a number of superintendents regarding the condition of rural schools and districts.

They plan to present this status report at the state's annual Rural Coalition meeting, a gathering of all the rural organizations in Pennsylvania, and use it as a point of departure for further discussions with others sharing their interest in rural education. From these discussions they intend to develop future scenarios which they will present to Pennsylvania's Governor, Secretary of Education, Director of Economic Development, legislators, and other significant policymakers. Their hope is that this will encourage these decisionmakers to reconsider current rural policies and make adjustments that will lead to rural school improvements.

Delaware

The Delaware RAC has taken a slightly different approach. Almost as soon as it had been finalized, the RAC members began presenting their list of critical issues to rural school boards, rural organizations, and associations with large numbers of rural constituents. They also publicized the list in the press and on television in an effort to advertise its existence

to as many of Delaware's rural citizens as possible. They expect to continue to publicize and present for another two or three months.

Their objective is to generate wide spread discussion about these issues and eventually gain a great deal of input about them before they create future scenarios. Their goal is to provide all Delaware citizens with ample opportunity to contribute to the scenarios. They believe that the more they enable rural (and even non-rural) constituencies to contribute to the scenarios they plan to develop, the more support they will have when they present these scenarios to the governor and legislature.

Targeted Policy Analysis: Work in the Planning Stages

As noted, the expressed overall goal of both the Pennsylvania and Delaware RACs at their inception was to have their states' educators, legislators, and even citizens re-evaluate the current educational policies that affect rural schools and students. As they have progressed with their strategic planning activities, the members of both of these RACs have begun to realize that in doing this they may well be asking for the re-evaluation of other existing policies -- economic, community development, revenue, and the like for example. Thus they can see a time in the not too distant future when the objectives of the Targeted Policy Analysis phase of SPERI will go far beyond the ones they had in mind at first. Neither RAC seems to be balking at this prospect, but there is a difference in how the Pennsylvania and Delaware RACs look forward to it.

Pennsylvania

Although they see it coming, the members of the Pennsylvania RAC do not seem very excited about any targeted policy analysis that goes beyond educational policies. They are realists and know that education, taxes,

community development, and so forth are linked. Yet they seem hesitant to cross policy boundaries and seem to prefer to have those legally charged with state level policy formulation in these other areas carry it out. Despite this they have expressed some sentiment for going ahead with their policy recommendations regardless of whether they go beyond education or not. However, at this point, they are far enough from the Targeted Policy Analysis stage of SPERI to not have to deal with this issue.

Delaware

In contrast, the members of the Delaware RAC see all policy areas as having an impact on education. Therefore, as they seek input across the state for their scenario development, they encourage recommendations and suggestions that deal with any policy. So far, they have gotten relatively few that deal specifically with education; instead, the recommendations have tended to focus on taxes and alternative community development options. For example, the Delaware Farm Bureau has suggested that the RAC create a scenario where property taxes are replaced by a state income tax. This certainly has educational implications, but it is not strictly an educational scenario. As another example, they have been asked to create a scenario in which housing developers are assessed the cost of a classroom for every 30 units they construct. This is a community development scenario with educational implications.

As with their Pennsylvania counterparts, however, the Delaware RAC members are not yet at the policy analysis stage. Therefore, it is difficult to know how far they will go into non-educational areas in making policy recommendations. At least one member keeps reminding the others that their primary focus is educational policy and that they always must be sure

to relate their scenarios and recommendations to the improvement of rural schooling.

Conclusions

It seems clear that for these two Rural Assistance Councils the SPERI system is working. Both were able to use it to identify significant issues facing rural schools in their states, examine these issues critically, and conduct surveys to determine their importance and urgency. Both are now undertaking the more difficult task of working in cooperation with others in their respective states to turn the survey results into scenarios and eventually into policy recommendations.

Thus far the Pennsylvania and Delaware RACs have followed the sequence and structure of the SPERI process fairly closely, but we can see them beginning to depart from it as they move toward the scenario building stages. For instance, they are seeking broad consensus about their issues and support for their efforts before they develop alternative scenarios and conduct policy analysis. As one Delaware RAC member puts it, they want to "line up the ducks" to make sure their scenarios and policy suggestions reflect viable potential solutions to each state's educational problems; but they want to be sure they do not unknowingly create futures that might penalize anyone -- by raising already high farm taxes, for instance. And they want to insure that when they present their policy analyses and recommendations to various governing bodies within their states, they can say with confidence that they speak for a lot of different constituencies.

This latest experience with the SPERI process bring us to the conclusion that it is as effective for state-level planning as it has been for local and district level planning. In addition, this experience gives

us further evidence that the strategic planning paradigm is appropriate and useful for educational decisionmaking. However, this use of SPERI reinforces something that we have been saying since we introduced the process: it does not and should not control planning. Those using it and the context in which they use it should control the process and the planning that comes from it. By adapting SPERI as they seem to be doing, the Delaware and Pennsylvania RACs have been able to use it comfortably. We believe that in using it comfortably, they will be able to benefit from SPERI and arrive at outcomes that are appropriate for them and valuable for the rural schools and students in their states.

APPENDIX A

ISSUES IN RURAL EDUCATION SURVEY

RESULTS

Listed below are a number of general and specific problems and issues facing rural education today. In order to develop a state plan to address these problems and issues, we need your input as to the priority which should be given to each based upon your experience as a rural educator.

Please rate both the general (numbered items) and specific issues (lettered items) according to the priority you think they deserve by circling the appropriate choice on the five-point priority scale accompanying each.

Issues	$\bar{x}$	% Priority					
		Very High Priority				Very Low Priority	
1. Fiscal Issues	4.78	5 82	4 14	3 4	2	1	[1]
a. General funding	4.76	5 80	4 17	3 3	2	1	[2]
b. Transportation	4.13	5 46	4 27	3 24	2 2	1 2	[3]
c. Special education	4.14	5 45	4 30	3 21	2 2	1 2	[4]
d. Building needs (including maintenance and construction)	3.92	5 34	4 34	3 25	2 5	1 2	[5]
e. Other (specify) (11) 5.00 _____ _____ _____		5 100	4	3	2	1	[6]
f. Other (specify) (5) 5.00 _____ _____ _____		5 100	4	3	2	1	[7]
2. Instructional Staff Issues	3.79	5 25	4 34	3 36	2 5	1	[8]
a. Recruitment in general and in particular areas of certification (e.g., foreign language, advanced math)	3.79	5 27	4 36	3 29	2 7	1 2	[9]
b. Retention	3.00	5 3	4 31	3 40	2 14	1 12	[10]
c. Professional development	3.88	5 34	4 29	3 31	2 5	1 2	[11]
d. Professional isolation	3.31	5 14	4 29	3 34	2 19	1 3	[12]
e. Part-time instructional needs	3.23	5 14	4 25	3 39	2 15	1 7	[13]
f. Age and experience of teachers	3.00	5 5	4 24	3 44	2 20	1 7	[14]

Appendix A Continued

Issues	$\bar{x}$	% Priority					
		Very High Priority				Very Low Priority	
g. Lack of guidance counselors (especially for elementary students)	3.47	5 25	4 22	3 32	2 15	1 5	[15]
h. Other (specify) (7) Counselors - secondary - especially female	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[16]
i. Other (specify) (1)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[17]
3. Instructional Program Issues	3.84	5 28	4 35	3 33	2 2	1 2	[18]
a. Lack of advanced placement or other "special" programs	3.67	5 26	4 33	3 26	2 14	1 2	[19]
b. Home teaching and schooling	3.03	5 15	4 17	3 32	2 27	1 8	[20]
c. Low post-secondary participation rates	3.29	5 12	4 33	3 33	2 17	1 5	[21]
d. Lack of career education programs	3.24	5 5	4 33	3 45	2 16	1 2	[22]
e. Poor articulation between instructional and guidance programs	3.05	5 5	4 20	3 51	2 22	1 2	[23]
f. High drop-out rates	2.81	5 7	4 17	3 39	2 25	1 12	[24]
g. Lack of vocational education programs	2.91	5 9	4 17	3 41	2 22	1 10	[25]
h. Not enough resources for special education needs	3.33	5 17	4 29	3 31	2 19	1 5	[26]
i. Difficulty implementing technology	3.29	5 12	4 33	3 33	2 14	1 7	[27]
j. Other (specify) (3)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[28]
k. Other (specify) (1)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[29]
4. Community and Family Issues	4.17	5 44	4 33	3 19	2 4	1	[30]
a. Economic development	4.44	5 64	4 17	3 17	2 2	1	[31]
b. Poverty (low per capita income)	4.01	5 36	4 38	3 21	2 2	1 3	[32]

Appendix A Continued

Issues	$\bar{x}$	% Priority					
		Very High Priority			Very Low Priority		
c. Unemployment	3.89	5 37	4 29	3 24	2 7	1 3	[33]
d. Things that put students "at-risk" (e.g., alcoholism, drug abuse)	4.16	5 42	4 39	3 14	2 3	1 2	[34]
e. Teenage suicide	3.37	5 20	4 24	3 32	2 20	1 3	[35]
f. Teenage pregnancy	3.76	5 25	4 36	3 31	2 7	1 2	[36]
g. High family mobility rates	3.22	5 9	4 26	3 47	2 17	1 2	[37]
h. Out-migration of talented youth	3.91	5 41	4 22	3 27	2 8	1 2	[38]
i. Divorce	3.94	5 27	4 43	3 29	2 2	1	[39]
j. Other (specify) (3)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[40]
k. Other (specify) (1)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[41]
5. Administrative Issues	4.11	5 36	4 45	3 11	2 7	1	[42]
a. Few administrators responsible for performing many administrative functions	4.32	5 55	4 26	3 16	2 3	1	[43]
b. Need for information and technical assistance in order to take advantage of opportunities	3.84	5 24	4 46	3 20	2 8	1 2	[44]
c. Poor economies of scale	3.58	5 16	4 38	3 36	2 11	1	[45]
d. Inability to obtain or develop specific expertise in order to take advantage of opportunities	3.56	5 16	4 41	3 31	2 9	1 3	[46]
e. Keeping up with and meeting state and federal regulations	4.18	5 44	4 34	3 19	2 3	1	[47]
f. Other (specify) (3)	4.66	5 67	4 33	3	2	1	[48]

Appendix A Continued

Issues	$\bar{x}$	% Priority					
		Very High Priority				Very Low Priority	
g. Other (specify) (0)		5	4	3	2	1	[49]
6. Revenue Issues	3.78	5 34	4 21	3 34	2 11	1	[50]
a. Student matriculation in non-district schools (e.g., private, parochial)	2.75	5 3	4 21	3 40	2 21	1 16	[51]
b. Tax assessments do not reflect actual usage	3.77	5 30	4 30	3 28	2 12	1	[52]
c. Other (specify) (3)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[53]
d. Other (specify) (1)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[54]
7. Tax Issues	4.00	5 40	4 28	3 23	2 9	1	[55]
a. Absentee owners	3.17	5 16	4 23	3 30	2 23	1 7	[56]
b. Absence of industry	4.22	5 56	4 21	3 16	2 4	1 4	[57]
c. State owned land	3.44	5 28	4 19	3 26	2 26	1 2	[58]
d. Income tax reciprocity with neighboring states	2.94	5 24	4 13	3 20	2 22	1 22	[59]
e. Other (specify) (3)	4.66	5 67	4 33	3	2	1	[60]
f. Other (specify) (1)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[61]
8. Other Issue (specify) (2)	5.00	5 100	4	3	2	1	[62]

Appendix B

Delaware Rural Issues

1. Fixed incomes
2. Referendums as means to determine tax rate
3. Lack community support since less than one-half citizens have school-aged children
4. Property taxes have traditionally been expected to be low
5. Hodgepodge of funding procedures
6. Economies of scale
7. Poor structure of assessment and re-assessment; it's left to the counties
8. Low tax base
9. Lack of business/industrial properties
10. Educational expenditures not considered as important as health, highways, etc.
11. Current salaries in rural areas are considerably lower than in urban areas
12. Vision/perception that education really isn't important
13. Provincialism
14. Tuition payment structure between districts
15. Schools have no control over county government granting tax exempt status to groups or individuals
16. State/federal properties tax exempt
17. Farmland assessment
18. Governor's establishing teacher's salary and telling locals they have to fund it
19. Too many rental properties
20. Resistance to change
21. Requirement that SD's establish a reserve in their local budget
22. Large number of senior citizens
23. Lack of resort area

24. Small population

25. Low education in area tends to equal fewer advanced degrees held by teachers

26. Over 65 exemption

27. Equalization Bill

28. Referenda law

29. Level of major capital improvement
30. Level of minor capital improvement

} 60/40

31. Choice

32. Cash-in options

33. Absentee voting in school-related elections

34. Disability exemption

35. One person/one vote

36. Rural areas are limited to the state units

37. Other employment costs

38. Vo-Tech Centers becoming comprehensive HS's

39. Disproportionate amount of funds generated in New Castle County

40. Teachers don't want to locate in rural areas

41. Districts with small number of students can't provide the depth and breadth of curriculum

42. Teachers cannot specialize

43. Availability of a range of satisfactory housing

44. Lack of cultural attractions

45. Teacher salary scales

46. Teacher benefit schedules

47. Lack of higher education opportunities in rural areas

48. Availability of sufficient usable funds

49. Poor management/lack of collegial ethos

50. Unions

51. Certification requirements are strict and getting stricter

52. Antiquated facilities

53. Union wants to divide and conquer (multiple bargaining units)

54. Small schools impact on scheduling

55. Finding staff to provide co-curricular activities

56. Tiny administrative staff

57. Small classes do not warrant a course

58. Partial units

59. Inadequate funding to take advantage of technology

60. Anyone can start a non-public school

61. Inadequate funding to cover legislative or state board requirements

62. Transportation

63. Lack of availability of jobs for grads or spouses in rural areas

Summary of Group Nominal Technique Procedures

Opening Statement

Inform the participants of the context of the session, indicating how Nominal Group Technique (NGT) results will be used in subsequent steps. Summarize the four basic NGT steps.

Conducting the NGT Process

1. Silent Generation of Ideas in Writing

   - Read the question aloud and ask members to list their responses in phrases or brief sentences. Request that they work silently and independently. Allow four to eight minutes.

2. Round-Robin Recording of Ideas

   - Go around the table and get one idea from each member. Write the ideas on a large flip-chart. As you finish each sheet, tape it on the wall so that the entire list is visible. Encourage hitch-hiking on other ideas. Do not allow discussion, elaboration, or justification.

3. Serial Discussion of the List of Ideas

   - Explain that the purpose of this step is clarification. Read item 1 aloud and invite comments. Then read item 2, and continue discussing each item in turn until the list is covered. Arguments are unnecessary because each member will have a chance to vote independently in Step 4. As soon as the logic of a position is clear, cut off discussion.

4. Voting

   - Each person selects the five (or more) items that are most important to him or her and writes each on a 3 x 5 card. These are then rank-ordered. The votes are recorded on the flip-chart in front of the group. The group then discusses the voting patterns. If desired, the items can be further clarified and a second vote taken.

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